

A common interest

Could spare rooms help fix the housing crisis?

If you’ve so much as glanced at a real estate app recently, you’ll know that it’s never been harder to find a home. And there’s not much light on the horizon either, with demand for housing set to outstrip the supply of new homes for years to come. But in Randwick City alone, there are almost 40,000 rooms sitting vacant in existing homes. Could opening our homes really help solve the housing crisis?

When eastern suburbs residents, Lianne and Rob, were preparing to welcome their second child, they knew their budget would be stretched.

“Everything’s gone up so much,” Lianne says, reflecting on leaving her job to care for their growing family.

“It’s much harder on a single income these days.” They were initially nervous about renting out their granny flat. “I had this idea that I’d be living with a backpacker or a student at a different stage of life – young, wild and free,” she laughs.

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Lianne, Aswi, Gyanu, her husband Kishan (not pictured) and Rob (pictured left to right) share a property in the eastern suburbs.

We’re speaking in the garden the families share, positioned between the house and the flat. Lianne sits beside Gyanu, a Nepali student and new mother completing her Master of Educational Leadership at UNSW. “Our kids play together. They’re teething at the same time,” Gyanu says. On cue, 10-month-old Aswi, flashes four teeth, beaming up at Lianne. It’s an idyllic scene, but could arrangements like this also help address the housing crisis?

In recent years, the NSW and federal governments have announced multi-billion-dollar policies to boost housing supply, increase social and affordable housing, and build dedicated student accommodation.

At a local level, Randwick City Council has investigated housing opportunities, with existing controls providing for 3,400 new homes to be built at major renewal sites, incrementally across the City.

New rules implemented by Council which commenced in 2023 could deliver a further 1,000 homes through changes to dual occupancy and increased density in special housing investigation areas.

Council has also advocated that the state government introduce incentives to free up existing housing stock, by applying a levy on empty homes and a ‘bed tax’ on properties used mostly for Airbnb.

And through agreements with community housing providers who manage its properties, Council provides affordable and emergency housing to vulnerable people.

Despite these efforts by all levels of government, the 2024 State of the Housing System report predicts housing demand will outstrip supply until 2029.

Data from Australia’s largest share accommodation website, Flatmates.com.au, reveals that Randwick City is one of the hardest places to find shared rental accommodation. In October 2024, for every available room in Clovelly, there were 184 people looking for a room in the suburb.

But there is hope. Recent Council analysis identified untapped potential in Randwick City, estimating that 37,000 rooms are sitting vacant in existing homes occupied by a sole occupant or couples without children.

Nation-wide, the 2021 census recorded 13 million unused bedrooms on census night. It’s a staggering number, but one that may soon come down as increasing numbers of homeowners consider opening

Ratio of people per suburb looking for rooms available:

Randwick	26:1
Clovelly	184:1
Coogee	45:1
South Coogee	90:1
Maroubra	13:1
Malabar	29:1
Matraville	8:1
Kingsford	5:1
Kensington	14:1

Source: Flatmates.com.au, Oct 2024



their homes to guests, according to Chris Rey, General Manager of the Australian Homestay Network.

The network links international students with homestay providers, and Randwick City is one of the most popular areas. Given its proximity to UNSW, there is plenty of demand – “we’re always looking for more hosts!” she exclaims.

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Home sharing is a trend observed by Quinten Buchan and Dalia Pisk, who deliver UNSW’s Off-Campus Accommodation Support service, assisting students to find accommodation, including alternatives to high-end, purpose-built facilities.

“For those that can’t afford one of those apartments, it’s a bit of a maze of options out there. Often students and hosts need guidance,” says Quinten.

Enter UNSW Study Stays – the university’s free online service to assist students searching for housing near campus. The website allows providers – including owners with spare rooms – to create a profile and list their vacancy on a searchable database.

Quinten says the service lists a range of options, from homestay arrangements to private rentals, boarding houses and home-sharing options.

Six months after accessing UNSW’s service, Lianne and Gyanu are delighted. Gyanu can focus on her studies knowing her family is secure in a private, affordable and self-contained flat just 15 minutes from her university.

And for Lianne, the income provides some financial relief. But it is the burgeoning friendship that has surprised the two women.

“We have a common interest because we’re both raising babies,” says Gyanu, “we help each other out, and our children play together.”

Their tips for potential hosts or renters? “Let go of your old ideas about share housing and look for someone you have things in common with and whose situation complements yours,” says Lianne.

Gyanu agrees and recommends meeting a few times before deciding. She says they first met on a video call, “I immediately got a positive vibe from them. They were so caring and kind.”

“To be honest, we’re like family now,” says Lianne.